

STATE OF INDIANA

ERIC J. HOLCOMB, Governor

PUBLIC ACCESS COUNSELOR LUKE H. BRITT

Indiana Government Center South 402 West Washington Street, Room W470 Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-2745 Telephone: (317)234-0906 Fax: (317)233-3091

Toll Free:1-800-228-6013 Email: pac@in.gov/opac Website: www.IN.gov/pac

OPINION OF THE PUBLIC ACCESS COUNSELOR

LARRY WARREN,)
Complainant)
v.) 16-FC-318
INDIANA STATE POLICE)
Respondent)

ADVISORY OPINION February 3, 2017

This advisory opinion is in response to the formal complaint alleging the Indiana State Police ("ISP") violated the Access to Public Records Act ("APRA"), Indiana Code § 5-14-1.5-1 et. seq. ISP responded to the complaint on January 19, 2017 via paralegal Sarah Graham. Pursuant to Indiana Code § 5-14-5-10, I issue the following opinion to the formal complaint received by the Office of the Public Access Counselor on December 16, 2016.

BACKGROUND

The complaint dated December 16, 2016, alleges the Indiana State Police violated the APRA by claiming there were no records pursuant to the request.

In a letter date June 13, 2016, the Complainant requested records from ISP seeking copies of any and all records, reports, notes which would have been created by ISP Lieutenant Donna Elam after their meeting in June of 2012. On June 21, 2016, ISP informed the Complainant that no such records are in its possession. The Complainant sent a letter dated August 31, 2016 with a more detailed request for the same information. The Respondents again informed the Complainant there were no records responsive to his request. The most recent request by Mr. Warren dated November 14, 2016, requested an update as to whether any records had been found.



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The Complainant filed his formal complaint dated December 16, 2016, alleging the FBI was able to send him records and reports in regards to this matter; therefore, the respondents have violated the APRA by not complying with his records request.

ISP claims it has conducted a full and thorough search using its agency's databases and found no records regarding Mr. Warren. The legal department also contacted Lt. Elam to verify no records exist. Additionally, Lt. Elam advised she did meet with the Complainant, but he was referred to the FBI and she never created any reports or notes regarding his case.

ANALYSIS

The public policy of the APRA states that "(p)roviding persons with information is an essential function of a representative government and an integral part of the routine duties of public officials and employees, whose duty it is to provide the information." *See Indiana Code § 5-14-3-1*. The Indiana State Police is a public agency for the purposes of the APRA. *See Indiana Code § 5-14-3-2(n)*. Accordingly, any person has the right to inspect and copy the ISP's disclosable public records during regular business hours unless the records are protected from disclosure as confidential or otherwise exempt under the APRA. *See Indiana Code § 5-14-3-3(a)*.

A request for records may be oral or written. See Indiana Code § 5-14-3-3(a); § 5-14-3-9(c). If the request is delivered by mail or facsimile and the agency does not respond to the request within seven (7) days of receipt, the request is deemed denied. See Indiana Code § 5-14-3-9(b). A response from the public agency could be an acknowledgement the request has been received and information regarding how or when the agency intends to comply. ISP has complied with the statute in regards to responding to the Complainant in a timely manner.

It appears ISP has done their due diligence in searching for the files the Complainant requested. The Respondents stated each time the Complainant made a request for these records, it would conduct a search, yet each time it yielded no results. I have held on many occasions a public agency does not have to create a document in order to satisfy a public records request. Generally, if a public agency has no records responsive to a public records request, the agency does not violate the APRA by denying the request. The APRA governs access to the public records of a public agency which are already in existence; the failure to produce public records which do not exist or are not maintained by the public agency is not a denial under the APRA. If the records do not exist, certainly ISP could not be required to produce a copy.



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CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing, it is the Opinion of the Public Access Counselor the Indiana State Police did not violated the Access to Public Records Act.

Luke H. Britt Public Access Counselor

Cc: Ms. Cynthia Forbes, Esq.